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Libyan raid eroded Qaddafi's position

Contrary to the predictions of many Middle East experts, Col Muammar Qaddafi has not been able to exploit the U.S. raid on his Tripoli headquarters to galvanize new popular support for himself at home or to rally a united Arab world in his defense abroad.

A measure of the Libyan dictator's increasing sense of isolation is the fact that he has recently sent out special emissaries to try to persuade prominent Libyan political exiles to return home to help solve the country's massive economic problems.

These desperate appeals are being consistently rejected by exiled leaders, who have no confidence in the erratic colonel. In the past, he has tried to have them assassinated, and they suspect entrapment.

Reflective of Col. Qaddafi's fear that he may have lost his charismatic hold on the Libyan masses is his bizarre and uncharacteristic personal behavior in

the weeks following the American bombing raid. Instead of rallying the population as he used to do with personal appearances before enthusiastic crowds, he has confined his public appearances to remote rural towns and relied on TV to reach large audiences. He keeps so low a profile and travels so continuously that even his close aides can't reach him when important decisions are pending.

Fear of his own people seems to have replaced his former bombastic confidence, and there is hard evidence that this personal concern for his safety is fully justified. According to U.S. officials, there have been at least four attempts on his life in the last two years, including one last November by a cousin who was a colonel in the Libyan army. Moreover, at a recent soccer riot in Tripoli, graffiti defaced the ubiquitous posters that display his portrait, and derisive chants against him were heard for the first time.

Instead of unifying the country behind him, the U.S. raid has served to deepen the lack of confidence between Col. Qaddafi and a substantial part of the Libyan officer corps. He blames them for failing to shoot down the U.S. planes, and they blame him for having provoked the raid by his terrorist attacks on Americans and for having supplied them with obsolete Soviet weaponry.

Even more disturbing to Col. Qaddafi must be the growing disenchantment within the Libyan army with his failure to extricate it from the unwinnable war in the deserts of Chad. His costly and unsuccessful attempts to help rebel forces against the French-supported Chadian regime has cost so many casualties that desertions from the Libyan army are a growing problem, and Col. Qaddafi's talk of replacing the army with a people's militia cannot have improved morale.

In the past, the Libyan dictator has been able to control and stifle discontent by a generous distribution of economic benefits from the cornucopia of Libyan oil wealth, but

since January Libyan hard currency earnings have been cut in two by the drop in the world price of oil. Responding to American pressures, European countries have sharply restricted their purchases of Libyan oil to drive the price down further, and an Italian court has finally confiscated Libyan assets because of failure to pay past debts.

As a result of the fall in hard currency earnings, strict import controls have had to be introduced in Libya, large construction projects have had to be abandoned, and foreign workers have been sent home. In a frank discussion with a Libyan exile, one of Col. Qaddafi's officials recently admitted that conditions after the raid were "terrible" and that there were

"shortages of everything." He even suggested that President Reagan might be the most popular man in Libya for having acted against Col. Qaddafi.

On top of the Libyan ruler's domestic troubles is his barely suppressed frustration with the failure of the Arab world to support him with effective action after the raid. Although there was some verbal condemnation of the U.S. strike, the Arab heads of state refused to heed Col. Qaddafi's demand to convene an emergency summit meeting in Fez to plan retaliation, and for this the Libyan colonel accused them of cowardice.

Finally, when Col. Qaddafi tried to play the Russian card in response to the raid, he was again rebuffed. Sending his deputy, Maj. Abdel Salam Jalloud to Moscow, Col. Qaddafi sought to sign a formal treaty of peace and friendship with the Soviets, but he became the first national leader to have requested such a treaty to have been refused. General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev was obviously not prepared to make binding commitments to so unreliable a partner.

During his 17 chaotic years in power, Muammar Qaddafi has often been in deep trouble, but he has always managed to extricate himself. On this occasion, Reagan officials assert, "Time is against him, the trend line is down, and he doesn't have many assets left."

The most likely outcome is seen to be an internal military coup against him, but don't count Col. Qaddafi out until it has actually occurred.

Cord Meyer is a nationally syndicated columnist.